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Ask a Librarian

Silvia Bunn

Mildred L. Terry Branch Library

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Ask a LIBRARIAN

Q: Silvia, your library is packed with users today! People of all ages are visiting with each other, using the Internet, reading and participating in other activities. In a space this tight, and a building this old, is it always this busy? If it is, what's your secret for keeping the patrons satisfied?

A: Well, it really is like this most of the time. This building is a real resource for those around it. We know that we are offering a service, and are happy to do it. More than that, we *believe in the value* of this and every public library! So if I had to name the "secret," which to us is the key to good customer service, it would be to really listen to your customers!

Librarians must cultivate a sense of empathy for the customer and must somehow retain the capacity to offer library service with a personal touch. For example, at our branch, many of our users do not have access to the Internet at home. Some may be embarrassed to ask us directly for help, so staff members have to be very alert and aware.

We begin all transactions with a hearty, genuine welcome to *THEIR* library. We try to convey the joy we feel about what we do to let people know that they are not an inconvenience to us. We find that that small gesture opens the door for us to offer assistance in a way that does not seem demeaning. As we gain their trust, we share in their excitement as they learn. We encourage them to return to tell us how their encounter with the library helped them solve their problem or otherwise enriched their lives. We hear about A's on tests, of improved reading scores, of how resumes prepared at the library lead to jobs. We constantly disciple and spread the word about how visits to the library change people's lives for good. Another thing we try to do is find ways to offer services that are relevant and meet needs, but that don't

cost a fortune. We partner to provide free GED and Spanish classes, cultural storytimes and tax assistance. We offer computer skills classes. So, find out what *YOUR* users need. It's not always the same from place to place. We also make it a point to thank people for coming.

Your community also needs to see you out in the community. Where possible, serve on boards and attend library board meetings. Live your enthusiasm. Advocate for the library and for the needs of your community. Most of all, (and this has been our secret!) — do not wait around for the resources, using that as an excuse for poor service — you have to use what you have, drum up the business, get the numbers up, make the patrons happy, and then you can justify your request for the resources and even enlist the help of the users in getting what you need.

In the case of this branch, the director, friends of libraries and the community as a whole have responded to increases with more urgent calls for getting a new branch erected. So, whether your branch and community have a lot or a little, wrap your arms, programs and services around your community with caring and with love. Let them know that the library is about them and that you are employed to meet their needs. They will then not so much notice the lack — but will revel in the service and will be grateful that you care. ►►

A former New York Times Librarian of the Year, Silvia Bunn is branch manager of the Mildred L. Terry Branch Library of the Chattahoochee Valley Regional Library System in Columbus. The Terry Branch, founded in 1953, was the first public library in the city for African-Americans. Plans are underway for a new, modern facility.

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